Citizens Advice West Somerset Update

Here at Citizens Advice West Somerset, we are keen to update you on local Citizens Advice news.

There are significant changes currently taking place in the organization of Citizens Advice in Somerset. The CA offices at Taunton, Sedgemoor, Mendip and South Somerset are merging to create a single Citizens Advice Charity later this financial year.

However, in West Somerset we have decided to remain as an independent charity as the nature of our population and location is quite different to those areas covered by the merging offices.

To explain – West Somerset has one of the lowest social mobility ratings in England (Source: Census 2021). The area has an extremely high level of resident senior citizens, with 51% over 55 years of age and 43% over 60 years of age (Source: Somerset Intelligence). This older population is at risk of being digitally excluded due to both a lack of IT skills and poor broadband/network coverage in our rural area. We meet people who struggle with some form or level of disability and are unable to apply for welfare payments or blue badges or cannot understand the contents of debt related documents or letters. Statistics from Somerset Intelligence places West Somerset as high risk of digital exclusion, very high risk in terms of average age, very high risk in terms of disability, low risk with digital speed, high risk based on low incomes and medium to high risk in terms of skills.

Our advisers provided one-to-one digital support to 30% of the people who visited our office between April 2022 and March 2023 in addition to sorting out the issues they needed help with. This way of working ensures we see these people on a face-to-face basis and do not rely on phone contact to offer them the best way to sort out their problems.

The outreach services are strategically placed to try and counteract the high cost and difficulty of travelling across the West Somerset estate, by offering face-to-face access at regular venues. We offer outreach services to other organisations in the area, for example Butlins in Minehead.

We are also offering the best value outsourcing opportunity for the new Somerset Council due to our well-developed relationships with Council teams such as Council Tax and Housing. Our Debt advisors also work with the external debt agencies, Dukes Bailiffs Ltd and Jacobs, Somerset Council’s commercial partners, and can help both companies achieve good outcomes for our clients.

By working closely with West Somerset Food Cupboard, we can meet residents’ needs for help, we collect and distribute food to those in need.

We have an ongoing programme to meet and talk to all 60 Parish and Town Councils in the West Somerset area and will continue with this work to both inform and help Councils to understand the services we can offer their residents.

If you would like to know more about our future plans, please do not hesitate to contact us.